

# Wild Acres - Habichat

*For stewards of Maryland's backyard wildlife*

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**HABITAT** - the arrangement of food, water, cover, and space - **IS THE KEY!** This newsletter is a place to share ideas, information, and help answer some of your habitat and wildlife gardening concerns.

**We want to hear from you!** Letters, e-mail, photos, drawings. Let us know how successful you are as you create wildlife habitat on your property.

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## Keep Those Bird Feeders Clean!

Feeding birds is an enjoyable hobby shared by many wild acres members. If you are going to feed, you must take precautions to prevent diseases that commonly affect those bird species that use feeders. Follow these basic steps to prevent or lessen disease problems at your feeders.

- Keep the feeder area free of droppings and waste like shells.
- Avoid crowding by making sure there is plenty of feeder space. Crowding produces stress, which can make birds more prone to disease.
- Keep feeders clean. Try using one part of liquid chlorine household bleach in nine parts of warm water. This serves as a suitable disinfectant. Immerse empty feeders for about three minutes in the disinfectant. Try to do this cleaning at least once a month or more often as needed.
- Use good food. Never use food that looks moldy, has fungus growing on it, is wet or smells musty.
- Be proactive! Don't wait until you see sick or dead birds. By following the preventive tips, you should rarely find sick or dead birds at your feeders.

**Note:** If you have concerns over sick or dead birds at your feeders, please contact your local [Maryland Wildlife & Heritage office](#) that serves your area.



## Native Plant Profile.....

### ..... Persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*)

The persimmon tree grows to 50 – 60 feet with a 2 foot diameter. It is a tree which is considered a slow grower which grows best in moist, rich soils. A native to the eastern U.S., it found in fields and woodlands.

**Flowers:** The flowers are small, usually less than ½ inch and are found in the axils of the leaves. Flowers can be found in small clusters or as a single bloom. They are greenish-yellow in color, blooming in May and June.

**Fruits:** The persimmon is best known for its fruit. This fruit is orange to almost reddish purple and is about 1 ½ inches in diameter. Four to six large flat seeds are found inside the flesh of each fruit. The fruits are astringent when unripe but are very sweet and edible when ripe.

**Landscape Notes:** A tree to consider using as a specimen plant for its unique looking leaves, bark and fruit.

**Wildlife Value:** The fruit of the persimmon tree is eaten by nearly all birds and mammals found in Maryland. Fruit hangs on the trees throughout much of the winter serving as an important food source for wintering birds. Wintering birds that eat the fruit include the mockingbird, robin, cedar waxwing and the wild turkey. Mammals are also quite fond of the fruit, especially the opossum, which lends the name “possumwood” to the tree. Raccoons and foxes find the fruit an essential food source in the late winter. Cavity dwelling mammals such as squirrels and opossums use the trees as shelter.

**Additional Notes:** Other members of the ebony family are commonly found in Asia. The tree bark is gray to black in color, broken up in distinctive small blocks. The leaves are alternate, smooth and oblong with a somewhat metallic luster.

Illustration of Persimmon  
Courtesy of Criselle Anderson

## The Pond

by Linda Barker



When I moved into my old 1895 house in June of 1991, I knew I wanted to build a pond, but since there were so many other things to attend to, I did not start to dig until late September of 1992. Construction was accomplished in a day, on one of those brilliant autumn days when the air was clean, and smelled of leaves, and the sky was silver-blue, and puffs of clouds occasionally hid the sun. In other words, it was a nice cool day for a sweaty job.

I decided on a kidney shape for the pond, shelves for marginals, and a really deep end for fish to hide from predators.

I found carpeting in a dumpster (a carpet installer's throwaways) to use under the liner, installed the liner, and filled the pond with water. After a two-week search, I found some pretty fieldstone in grays and reddish-purple for the edge of the pond. Since it was so late in the year, no residents-plant or animal, moved into the water.

However, some plants applied for, and got positions bordering the pond. I planted *Panicum* "Heavy Metal", a dwarf weeping hemlock "Jeddeloh" near the pond edge, a Japanese cut leaf maple "Ever Red", and a Juniper, *Procumbens nana*.

Spring of 1993 was exciting, as I heard peepers at the pond. I made haste to obtain plants for them. Oh, how to choose? There were so many plants available! I bought a pickerel weed, some hardy lilies, an *Iris pseudocorus*, oxygenators, snails, floating hearts, and a dozen "feeder goldfish. More frogs moved in-even a very large bullfrog. Where had he been? How did he know to come to my pond? American toads came to breed, which produced hundreds of Gumby-legged toadlets. Their mass exodus was amazing and amusing as these brave bits of rubbery skin made their way to land and plant cover.

I made a small waterfall to aerate the water for the fish by threading the tubing from the pond pump to the rock edging near the little hemlock, and placing a curved rock over the tubing to hide it. Smooth river rock was arranged near the hemlock and partially behind it to give the impression of a stream emptying into the pond.

In the summer of 1996, I added other plants, and divided some of the originals. My fish have suffered depredations from raccoons, only four of the original 12 goldies still live, but they are large, and lovely, and come to be fed. I bought them more friends of good size, so that the frogs would not consider them dinner, and found that I must have introduced breeding into the pond.

My frogs are getting used to me, and slip into the water only when I trespass into their personal space. Dragonflies have appeared as well as water striders, beetles, and some not so desirable aphids, and a snake or two, but I am enjoying my pond, and could spend more time there than I have available.

In this winter of 2003 with abundant snow and freezing temperatures, I am finding that my pond is a gathering place for thirsty wildlings. Since I equip the pond with a small heater, the water has never frozen over completely, and apparently must be the only place for miles that has not. There are more hoof, toe and claw prints in the snow than I can count, and I have had to add many gallons of water to maintain the pond. I have found that something is always going on at the pond, and this new use as a watering hole is a surprise. It surely is a wonderful, gleaming bright eye in the landscape in all seasons, and as it continues to develop, will hold many more delights and surprises.

Note: Linda Barker has been a long-time participant of Maryland's Wild Acres Program.

For More Information, Click on the link below.  
**[Creating a Wild Backyard: Backyard Ponds](#)**



## Lawns and Wildlife? What Can You Do

Lawns offer little food, or cover to the majority of wildlife. Any opportunity to replace lawns with mulched areas, flowers, meadows, trees and shrubs are a definite plus for wildlife. If you are interested in providing habitat for wildlife see if you can reduce the size of your lawn to no more than 40% to 50% of your outside area.

Use a variety of grasses that requires the least amount of water, fertilizer and pesticides for your area. A good source for this information is the Home and Garden Information Center at [www.agnir.umd.edu/users/hgic](http://www.agnir.umd.edu/users/hgic).

Most lawns are over-watered. If you must water, do it early in the morning when evaporation is minimal and it will benefit the grass the most. Find out from the nursery or extension office how much water is recommended for your grass variety.

If possible use a mulching mower to prevent having to collect and throw away grass clippings. Set the mower at the higher cutting lengths. Taller grass is better able to shade the soil and crowns, reducing water loss and encouraging deeper rooting. Longer grass will be stronger grass, because more leaf surface is available to produce carbohydrates for food. The Home and Garden Center can also provide that information for your grass variety.

Break up the lawn with island plantings of trees with shrubs and ground covers. Remember very few birds are attracted to just a mowed lawn but will use these island plantings.

If you still want a manicured lawn, try to edge it with shrubs that can provide leaf litter where birds such as towhees can scratch the area for food. Whenever possible replace that lawn grass with native grasses and wildflowers. They are more drought tolerant and bring the birds and butterflies to your backyard.

[Home and Garden Information Center](http://www.agnir.umd.edu/users/hgic)

- Photograph Courtesy of Pete Jayne

## Soil Fertility

Every wild acres gardener wants their soil to be able to produce suitable plants to attract wildlife and look healthy. Fertile soil certainly is an important component in this. Have your soil tested to determine the amount of fertilizer and lime needed. Follow the recommendations on the amounts to apply. Contact the Maryland Cooperative Extension Office in your county for soil testing information.

Do not be tempted to over-fertilize. If everyone over-fertilized their backyard by just one pound, it would create huge amounts of unnecessary nitrogen and phosphates going into our waterways and the Chesapeake Bay.

Use a slow release pellet when fertilizing. Fall is the best time to do this as it allows ample time for the nutrients to enter the soil. Be sure to sweep any pellets off hard surfaces, such as sidewalks. This prevents nutrients from the pellets going directly into the storm drain and to the bay.

Keep paved areas to a minimum in the wild acres site. If you are going to have a patio or walk in the area, consider using gravel, wood chips, stepping stones and bricks on sand without mortar. All these reduce run-off and allows fertilizer to go into the soil for those wonderful plants you have established for wildlife.

## Additional Information

Here is a listing of phone numbers, web sites and organizations that you might find helpful or interesting in your search for ideas to manage your wild acres. **DNR Online...** Inspired by nature! [www.dnr.maryland.gov](http://www.dnr.maryland.gov)

**National Wildlife Federation** - Details on their backyard habitat program [www.nwf.org](http://www.nwf.org) or call them at 1-800-822-9919.

Native plants - **The Maryland Native Plant Society** offers information dedicated to protecting, conserving and restoring Maryland's native plants and habitats, visit them at [www.mdflora.org](http://www.mdflora.org).

**Maryland Cooperative Extension** offers home and garden information, tips publications, plant problems, Bay issues, and other links at [www.agnr.umd.edu/MCE/index.cfm](http://www.agnr.umd.edu/MCE/index.cfm) Their **Home and Garden Information** number is statewide and can be reached at 1-800-342-2507, and from outside Maryland at 1-410-531-1757.

Maryland's "**Becoming an Outdoors - Woman Program**" - One of the topics covered in the three-day workshops is Backyard Wildlife. For more information on this program contact Karina Blizzard at 410-260-8559 or send e-mail to: [kbizzard@dnr.state.md.us](mailto:kbizzard@dnr.state.md.us).

For more information on butterflies - visit the **North American Butterfly Association** at [www.naba.org](http://www.naba.org)

Warm season grasses and wild meadows for upland nesting birds visit **Pheasants Forever** at [www.pheasantsforever.org](http://www.pheasantsforever.org) or e-mail: [pf@pheasantsforever.org](mailto:pf@pheasantsforever.org)

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**For additional information about the Wild Acres Program  
and for back issues of HABICHAT, Visit us on the DNR Website.**

**<http://www.dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/wildacres.asp>**

